

# Stewards and workplace representatives' handbook

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## Welcome to the UNISON stewards and workplace reps handbook

This handbook is intended for both newly elected stewards and workplace contacts and for active members who would like to get more involved in UNISON at workplace level.

The handbook gives you key information for workplace representatives and signposts you to other useful information available to you. It introduces crucial parts of the role – including recruitment and organising, dealing with members' problems, working with the employer and stewards' rights, as well as providing general information about UNISON.

Stewards and workplace representatives are an essential part of the union's organisation and are a vital link between members in a particular workplace or department, or working for a specific employer, and the wider union. The work that you do in recruiting, organising and supporting the members you represent is vital to our success as the UK's largest public service trade union.

Finally – thank you for stepping up and becoming a workplace representative. UNISON is committed to providing you with the training and support you need to carry out your role confidently and effectively. We also want our reps to feel able to put what they learn into practice, and we have developed our Trained and Active approach to supporting workplace reps to help you. There is more information about this on page 6, and throughout the handbook you will find useful contacts and information about other sources of support.

**Christina McAnea**

UNISON general secretary

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## 1 Introduction – organising to build a strong union

The stronger we are as a union, the more we are able to support our members and organise at local and national level to improve the working lives of all those who work in public services.

There is nothing more important than getting people to join the union to build its strength. But we also need to ensure that members get more involved in their union to give themselves and their colleagues the ability to influence what happens to them at work and beyond.

### What is organising?

When we use the term ‘organising’ we mean:

- **Working together** – this means supporting members and involving them in the actions needed to resolve their problems – so it’s more about: ‘What can we do about it?’ rather than: ‘Leave it to me and I’ll sort it for you’.
- **Listening to members’ views** – campaigning on issues that members care about and actively involving them in activities of the union.
- **Knowing where our members and reps are, and where we could recruit more** – this is known as mapping.
- **Promoting democracy and membership participation** – we want all our members, wherever they work and whatever their background, to be able to participate fully in the union.

The organising approach builds our strength as a union both through recruiting new members and by encouraging all members to play their part by becoming active and getting involved.

UNISON is a democratic organisation which tries to put its members at the heart of everything it does. This means members should be encouraged to:

- **Get involved and active** – as little or as much as they can
- **Be a part of negotiations and decisions in their workplace**
- **Work together as a group** – there is always strength in numbers
- **Help us keep in touch with all our members and potential members**
- **Speak up in their workplace**

This handbook sets out ways in which you can help build an organising union.

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## 2 The workplace representative in UNISON

### Role of a steward

Stewards are elected each year by the group of members that they represent and the post is open to job share.

UNISON aims to have at least one steward in each workplace and department, more in larger departments and where members work shifts.

Stewards are involved in different levels of activity depending on their experience, skills and the time they are able to commit.

Once trained, and with branch support, as a UNISON steward you are likely to:

- be a key point of contact with the union for members and potential members, and have regular conversations and contact with members
- recruit new members and encourage them to get involved
- encourage existing members to become involved in local union activity around issues which matter to them
- support and advise members on workplace issues, both individual and collective, and (with support and training) represent them if they have grievances or are facing disciplinary procedures
- represent the views of the members and ensure they are consulted and informed
- participate in branch activity including meetings and campaigns.

## **Workplace contacts**

Workplace contacts have a more informal role than stewards. As a contact you can also operate as part of a network supporting an elected steward.

You will often be a first point of contact in a workplace, with a key role to keep in touch with members, with regular catch ups and sharing of information. You play an important role in enabling groups of members to organise effectively, for example around a campaign or a change in the working environment.

## **Information about other workplace representative roles**

This handbook is primarily aimed at stewards, but much of its content will be useful for workplace contacts and other active members. Other “rep” roles are:

### **Health and safety representative**

Health and safety reps have the right to training and to raise issues which affect the health and safety of members. More information about their role is available in the ***UNISON Health and Safety Reps Handbook***.

### **Union learning representative (ULR)**

ULRs encourage and support members and potential members around a range of learning opportunities. They work with their branch to negotiate on learning issues – like time off and access to training – with employers and encourage new learners to get involved in UNISON.

### **Equality reps**

Help branches and stewards support members tackling discrimination and promote equalities issues with the employer and branch.

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## 3 Training and support for workplace representatives

### At your UNISON branch

The first point of contact for UNISON stewards is your local branch. This is the core local point of organisation for members and also normally the main vehicle for negotiation between the union and the employer. All members belong to a branch and stewards are a key contact point between members and the branch. Branches are run by officers elected by the membership every year. Key contacts for you as a new rep are the branch secretary and the branch education co-ordinator who will organise your initial training.

### Through a named contact

All new representatives should be allocated a named contact, buddy or mentor to support you and get you started in the role. At one of your early meetings they will introduce you to the Trained and Active plan (known as the TAP form). The contact can also direct you to opportunities to gain practical experience, for example, by shadowing existing reps.

### Regular training courses

UNISON provides a comprehensive range of education and training for activists and members which is delivered at branch, regional and national level.

Courses are summarised on our U-train online training guide ([unison.org.uk/for-activists/training](https://unison.org.uk/for-activists/training)), and include:

- a one day course for workplace contacts
- the Organising Steward course, and equivalent courses for other workplace representatives
- second stage courses on representation, negotiation skills, equalities, organising, tutor skills and leadership, plus a range of courses for branch officers.

### UNISON regions

UNISON has 12 regions, each of which have one or more regional offices. You may well visit a regional office for training courses. Local, area and regional organising staff based in the region work closely with branches to support recruitment, organising, representation and bargaining, and regions organise the training programmes for reps.

### UNISON Centre

The UNISON Centre, based in Euston in London, is where departments co-ordinating union-wide activity are based.

### More information

Your rights and how to find out more – page 14, [unison.org.uk](https://unison.org.uk), through your regional website, and from your regional education officer.

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## 4 Getting started: your role in the workplace

Building good relationships with members locally is a fundamental aspect of any workplace representative role. This should be two-way – you are there to offer support and advice but you also will need the support of members and their practical help to be able to carry out your role effectively.

It is also crucial that UNISON is a strong presence – and this means having lots of active members. Recruitment and organising means signing up new members and encouraging all your members to play their part.

By far the most effective way for you to do this is to be out and about, having regular conversations with members and potential members, asking them to join the union and ensuring that UNISON has a visible presence in the workplace.

### Finding out about who is in the workplace

A first step should be to find out who and where your members are. All stewards should have a group of members to whom they are accountable. Similarly, most workplace contacts will have a group of members with whom they work – sometimes known as your constituency. If you are not sure which areas you cover, your branch will be able to help. Remember that some of the workers in your constituency might not be around at the same time as you – shift workers or those who are contracted out or who work from home.

### Workplace mapping

An effective way of finding out what you do and don't know about your workplace – and what you need to find out – is by mapping.

Try sketching out the department, workplaces or group of workers you represent. Mark on your map each of the following, broken down according to where the individuals are based:

- number of UNISON members
- number of members by shift and/or employer
- number of members of other unions
- number of potential members who can be approached to join UNISON
- which members might be able to help with regular or occasional tasks – like keeping a noticeboard up to date for example
- where there are current (or potential) workplace problems

You will have the chance to find out more about mapping on the Organising Steward course or from your branch colleagues. There are also examples of workplace maps on the Organising Space (see page 15)

### Working with all our members and equalities

UNISON is committed to equalities. Our *Rule Book* commits the union to working towards fair representation for all groups of members and a balance of women and men on union committees which is in line with the membership.

Encouraging participation in the union by all members helps to build a stronger union. A broad-based union membership sends a powerful message to employers that the union speaks for the whole workforce. It also helps encourage new members to get involved and active.

All stewards have an important role to play in encouraging full participation and promoting equality in the union by helping to make sure that:

- meetings and discussions are run in an open and friendly way so that everyone feels able to participate, and no-one is put off by procedural points and jargon
- union meetings are held at times that are convenient for people who might be part-time workers or have family commitments, and are held in accessible venues
- members are encouraged to participate in relevant self organised groups.

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## 5 Recruiting new members

Recruiting new members to the union is crucial. The greater the proportion of workers who are members of UNISON, the stronger we are when it comes to having our voice heard. Most importantly, it makes sense to be in a union. Here are some ideas about the best ways to talk to colleagues about joining UNISON. You will get more ideas and the chance to practice on the Organising Stewards course.

### **Be visible and active!**

New members are far more likely to join if they see that UNISON is getting things done. Potential members will see you when you talk to members, and they will notice when their colleagues who are already members get involved in union activity - signing a petition, wearing a badge or going to a meeting for example.

### **Plan ahead**

When you are going to be in a workplace for whatever reason, plan who you need to talk to about joining UNISON. Have a form and information about online joining handy. The application forms set out exactly how much it costs to join UNISON – it is often less than people think.

Get together information about what is happening in the workplace and about UNISON's services and campaigns.

See page 17 for information about membership benefits including learning opportunities, There for you, legal support and membership offers.

### **Just ask!**

A major reason why people don't join unions is because no-one has ever asked them. If a colleague is happy to join, encourage them to fill in the form straight away.

If they are certain they don't want to join at the moment, ask them an open question to find out some more about their concerns in the workplace, and end on a positive note. Next time you see them, be sure to say hello and leave the door open for further conversations.

### **Ask questions, listen and respond**

Asking the potential member what's going on for them at work at the moment



is a good opener. If you can, find a hook – something that might interest the worker in UNISON – so that you can go back for a further conversation the next time you are around. It is also a good idea to keep a note of who you have spoken to and what they might be interested in.

Don't make assumptions about what might interest a potential member. For some members, UNISON's services, such as free wills and legal advice, may be the thing that encourages them to join. For others, it will be a campaign issue or anxiety about change or privatisation.

Remember – your aim is to get the new recruit interested in getting involved in the union. If the member has an issue, don't promise you can fix it for them, discuss how you can work together to solve the problem.

## **New starters**

Planning ahead is especially important with new starters. Make sure you – or another member in the same workplace – gives them some information about how to join on their first day. Bear in mind that potential members are more likely to be recruited by colleagues they know and trust. We know that 'like recruits like', for example, that young people are more likely to recruit other young people.

If there are induction sessions for new starters, go along – your branch should have a presentation you can use, and even more important, it is a great opportunity for one-to-one conversations.

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## **6 Keeping in touch with members**

You have an important role to keep your members informed and to find out what they think on branch priorities.

- You will need to have regular discussion with your members about:
- what the branch is doing on key issues, such as a pay offer, redundancies or workplace reorganisation
- what members' views on local negotiations are so you can make sure that these are fed back to the branch
- information issued by the union from regional and national level, for example, details of UNISON campaigns.

### **Ways of keeping in touch**

#### **One-to-one conversations**

Take every opportunity you can to develop informal contacts with members in whatever way best suits your workplace – when there is a change of shift, a break, a staff meeting or a social event.

#### **Be clear about how and when you can be contacted**

Set aside regular times when you can be contacted in person or by phone. Try to visit some or all of the workplace at least once a week. Ensure that your members know how to contact you, but also make sure you look after yourself! Don't feel you have to be available at all times and establish clear boundaries.

### **Noticeboards, leaflets and surveys**

These are all useful means of keeping in touch. Your branch will be able to order materials from UNISON and may well have their own newsletters as well.

### **Website, email and social media**

Your branch may well have a Facebook page, twitter feeds and a website, and you may well have permission to use the employer's email system. Remember that none of these forms of communication are private however. Always check your employer's guidance on using social media at or about work.

### **Build a network of workplace contacts**

Having contacts in individual workplaces who can keep in touch with you about local issues can really help you to reach out to members. This is especially important if your members are spread out across a number of workplaces such as care homes or GP surgeries.

### **Workplace meetings**

These provide an opportunity for members to exchange views and ideas on key issues. Regular, informal workplace or section meetings enable you to organise around relevant issues and share information from the branch.

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## **7 Getting members involved**

Here are some pointers to get you started.

- Find out, and make a note of, what types of skills and interests members have.
- Use every opportunity to encourage members to take small steps to support the union. Actively consulting them and asking their advice about what is going on in the workplace will be an important first step.
- Opportunities could range from a major workplace reorganisation to a complaint about harassment, or a campaign on a local issue that members are concerned about in their communities.
- Plan ahead. If you have identified a member as a potential workplace contact, for example, bring along with you a meaningful small task that you can ask that member to help with. Plan how you will follow this up, thank them for their help and have further suggestions for how they can get involved.
- Active membership can mean all kinds of different things: everyone sending one email to a friend or filling in a survey are good examples of small actions that could help build UNISON in your workplace.

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## **8 Taking on workplace issues**

You have found out who and where your members are and what they are concerned about. But what now? The steward is not expected either to take up every issue or to deal with important issues on their own. There will be a

variety of different responses, depending on what the issue is. Here are some of the options:

- If lots of members are involved, organise a workplace meeting to find out more and discuss raising the issues with the employer.
- Where appropriate, work with the member to pursue an individual grievance or represent a member who may be disciplined. The branch will be able to support you in this.
- Involve the branch secretary, branch education co-ordinator, equalities officer or other relevant branch officer – or pass the query on to them.
- Pass on information to other stewards and involve them in planning
- Publicise issues at a branch committee or in a newsletter.

For more information: *Organising Steward Course Workbook*; *UNISON Code of Good Branch Practice*.

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## 9 Campaigning

UNISON has a proud tradition as a campaigning union, both inside and outside the workplace. UNISON is also frequently involved in smaller scale campaigns to improve local services, avert cuts or closures.

When planning a campaign it is crucial to build in how to involve members and recruit new members around the campaign issue.

Effective campaigns often go beyond the workplace and involve the wider community. Involving service-users in your campaign, for example, can help to make it more powerful and have a positive influence on local publicity.

A workplace campaign should be:

Widely and deeply felt, winnable, and in keeping with UNISON's values. For more information see *Effective Campaigning*, a UNISON guide and the strategic campaign workshop, available from [learningandorganising@unison.co.uk](mailto:learningandorganising@unison.co.uk)

### Your part in a UNISON campaign

UNISON encourages its stewards and workplace representatives to get involved in our campaigns. Campaigning on issues that affect members not only helps us achieve our aims as a union, it is also a great way to get members involved and to involve and recruit new members. The role of a steward could range from:

- Planning and running a local organising campaign in your own workplace around something of concern to members. You will have the chance to plan and practice campaigning skills on the Organising Steward course.
- Supporting a branch based campaign around a major issue affecting you all – this could be privatisation or a change to terms and conditions.
- Getting involved in a national campaign. This could involve galvanising your members around an issue like pensions and encouraging them to participate in a national day of action or demonstration.

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## 10 Representing members

When UNISON members face problems at work, the first person they should turn to is their UNISON steward. An important part of your role will be to support individual members by helping them take their concerns to the employer.

You should attend training before carrying out any representation. Once trained, you will be ERA certified – that is, certified in line with the Employment Relations Act. The law states that stewards should have regular refresher training. In UNISON that is at least every five years.

The key source of information for stewards is UNISON's *Representation Guide*. The following is a summary of types of representation you might be involved in.

- **disciplinary cases** – your employer takes action against a member for their conduct at work. There should be an existing procedure which is part of your terms and conditions of employment and you should have a copy. In particular, be aware of time limits for appeals.
- **individual grievances** – a member has a complaint about pay or working arrangements. Again, there is usually an existing procedure
- **collective problems or grievances** – a group of members have a problem to be discussed or negotiated with management. These can be dealt with through ad hoc meetings, or formal negotiating or disputes procedures
- **health, safety and learning issues** – these can be dealt with through local discussion and negotiation with your employer. Talk to the members initially and then involve the local safety representative or union learning rep
- **gradings** – most employers have a set procedure for awarding grades to posts and appealing against unsatisfactory grades
- **bullying and harassment** – some employers have special procedures for dealing with harassment and/or bullying complaints
- **discrimination** – many employers have specific procedures for dealing with discrimination. All cases which might involve race discrimination must be referred to the region
- **capability/ill health** – many employers have procedures that make it easier for managers to deal with poor job performance, or sickness absence.

### Checklist

You may find the following checklist helpful when planning and organising to deal with an issue:

- consider what advice, assistance and support you need from other stewards and the branch
- discuss options with your members
- agree a realistic aim and approach
- consider what your member could do for themselves, with your support and assistance
- be aware of time limits for registration of a grievance in giving notice of an appeal.
- if other members are concerned, think about how this would influence your plan

- consider if the issue could be taken up collectively
- consider the best way to raise this issue with management
- keep other stewards and the branch committee informed
- check that you have stayed within UNISON policy
- think about how the issue could be used to ask members to get more involved in the union
- discuss with the union how to use the issue to attract and involve new members.

More information: *UNISON Representation Guide*.

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## 11 Working with the employer

UNISON branches and stewards are involved in a range of local bargaining. The issues which your branch may be negotiating on will depend on the service group and type of employer you have.

The role of the local negotiator is an important one requiring some different skills to those you will have used in representing people in grievances and disciplinary cases. The union provides training and backup for all stewards and officers involved in negotiation and bargaining.

### Issues for negotiation and consultation

A wide range of issues can and should be subject to negotiation and consultation. If your employer recognises UNISON these are very likely to include pay and conditions of employment, issues around job grading and job evaluation and working practices, transfers and redundancies.

### National and local bargaining

Many public sector employers participate in some form of national bargaining. Agenda for Change in the NHS is a good example. In these cases, it is common for a recognition agreement to be made with the unions nationally and for this to include provision for national negotiations to take place on certain core terms and conditions, such as pay, hours of work, holidays, overtime rates, etc.

These national recognition agreements usually provide for local negotiations in certain areas.

### Working with other unions

Many recognition agreements include more than one union. In this case it is important for all unions to meet together, to co-operate and try, whenever possible, to agree a common approach.

### Stewards and local bargaining

Stewards play a key role in any local bargaining process. As a steward you are particularly important in:

- ensuring that members' views and concerns are fed into the bargaining process

- keeping members informed of developments
- enabling members' views to be properly canvassed and fed back as the negotiation progresses
- promoting widespread participation in ballots, surveys, etc.
- informing members of the outcome of any negotiations.

## Local bargaining and membership organisation

The basis of your strength in negotiations is the strength of the organisation of UNISON in your workplace. Preparing claims and making agreements are great ways of recruiting new members and also getting more members involved in the union.

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## 12 Your rights and how to find out more

### Your rights as a UNISON rep

Where UNISON is recognised by the employer, stewards are entitled by law to certain arrangements to assist them in doing their job as elected representatives of UNISON members. These include:

- Reasonable time off for undertaking trade union duties and for training. Your branch will be able to advise you of local arrangements and organise training.
- Facilities to help you do the job, including access to telephones, computers and email systems, use of notice boards, lockable filing facilities and in some cases use of dedicated office space
- Access to information relevant to negotiations or change in the workplace.

In many cases, there will be a written agreement made between the employer and UNISON (and possibly other unions) which explains what sort of support you are entitled to.

Further information is available in UNISON's *Time to Act*.

### Where the union is not recognised

Stewards and workplace representatives working for employers who do not recognise UNISON do not have access to comprehensive legal rights to time off or facilities. However, there are some limited legal rights which do apply to you and which can be used to help build workplace organisation.

- Representing members in hearings. The *Employment Relations Act 1999* gives all workers the right to be accompanied to grievance and disciplinary hearings by a fellow worker or 'companion'. Stewards and workplace contacts can therefore volunteer to act as a companion for members even when they are not recognised as UNISON stewards by the employer.
- Right to seek recognition. If over 50% of the workers join the union it is possible to require the employer to grant some recognition. Your branch or regional organiser will provide more information, but the first step is to get going with recruitment and organising. See sections 4 – 7 above for how to get started!

## **Protection against dismissal and victimisation**

Stewards and workplace contacts have rights as trade union members not to be victimised or dismissed on union grounds. This is especially important for stewards in workplaces where the union is not recognised because they may be organising trade union activities in workplaces where the employer is openly hostile.

## **Finding out what's happening in UNISON**

UNISON provides a wealth of information for its stewards and members.

A useful starting point is the website *unison.org.uk*. Use the search engine to get you started. You can log into the UNISON knowledge section with your membership number – and if you are not sure what that is, call UNISONdirect on 0800 0 857 857 to find out.

You can download the UNISON app onto any smartphone or blackberry. Just search for UNISON in your App store. This will allow quick access to join on line and other information.

As a steward you should also receive the weekly newsletter, emailed to all workplace representatives to keep them informed of campaigns and new developments. Make sure your email address is registered on the membership records system.

All registered stewards and activists should also receive the monthly Activist magazine which includes news, briefings and updates on issues which affect you.

Branches and your regional office also send representatives regular information on local matters.

## **UNISONdirect**

UNISON's phone line service is dedicated to providing an information and advice service for members and stewards. UNISONdirect can be contacted by telephone or online form:

Telephone: 0800 0 857 857

Textphone: 0800 0 967 968 (freephone)

Online form: general enquiry form

Lines are open from 6am to midnight on Monday to Friday and 9am to 4pm on Saturday. Outside these times, you can leave an answerphone message and UNISONdirect will call you back.

## **Organising Space**

UNISON is pioneering a new secure social learning site called the Organising Space.

The space was developed specially for stewards, activists and staff to be a part of an organising community – sharing knowledge, ideas, learning and experiences right across our union.

It is a space where you can research and share organising best practice and be involved in shaping and creating new organising resources.

So make sure you are registered to use My UNISON.

For more information go to <https://organisingspace.unison.org.uk>.



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## 13 Data protection

### Workplace Mapping – Data Protection Act

The Data Protection Act (DPA) is a law that ensures organisations adhere to certain principles and provisions when collecting information (personal data) about people. The provisions of the DPA overrule all other laws, and apply to the collection, storage and use of personal data at all times.

The Act applies to the day to day work of UNISON representatives. There are 2 areas of particular relevance.

#### 1. When you are keeping a record of who you have been talking to

“Personal data” is any information about a living person which enables them to be identified, so when information is being collected about people in the workplace for mapping purposes, we are dealing with personal data and it is very important to ensure that:

- people are made aware that you are collecting information about them
- people are given the chance to opt out of their personal data being collected (if someone objects, it is still be possible to map information which will help you establish your workplace map, just make sure that you only record their job title)
- you keep the collected information safe and secure
  - i. if you keep a paper based record, ensure that the paper is kept in a secure, lockable filing cabinet
  - ii. if you keep the information electronically, ensure the relevant document is password protected
  - iii. Only share the collected information with branch officials, and ensure that you do not inadvertently disclose the collected information to others (e.g. by taking your paper record around with you and completing the entry about each individual in front of others)
- you do not keep the information for longer than is necessary. Ideally the information will be updated when you next carry out a mapping exercise, and the original information will be deleted or destroyed
- you delete electronic files and destroy paper records in such a way that that they cannot be seen by other people. If you keep a paper record, please destroy by shredding, or put in the confidential waste to be securely destroyed.

#### 2. When representing members

When representing members we need to ensure that members rights under the DPA are upheld in every activity carried out. As well as the right of knowing we are collecting and using information about the member, and that we need to keep the information safe and secure, the member also has a right of “subject access” under the DPA. This means that they can make a request to see and have copies of all personal information UNISON is holding about them and what it is being used for. The information can be held in either paper files or electronic files, like Word documents and emails.

You will be collecting some very sensitive information from the member during the representation process, and so it is very important to ensure the following:



- The member must be made aware that you will be collecting and recording information about them (sounds obvious, but we need to let them know this)
- Confidentiality and privacy is maintained at all times
- Case forms and other relevant employment case documents are stored securely, and in a lockable cabinet
- Electronic information should be password protected if possible
- Paper forms should not be left in an open office, and computer screens should be locked when you are away from your desk
- Only share the information collected with people who have a justifiable reason to see it
- Consult your branch about how information should be filed in paper files/ electronic folders so that any subsequent “subject access” requests from members can be dealt with efficiently.
- Do not commit to paper or electronic documents any opinions or other information that you would not wish the member to see
- Check with your branch what system you must follow when you remove a file from a filing cabinet so that the branch can log and track where case files are at any time.

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## 14 Union benefits and services

UNISON provides valuable member benefits, which are also good starting points to encourage recruitment. The main services are listed below:

### There for you

There for you is UNISON’s unique members’ welfare charity. It provides assistance to members and their dependants in times of financial hardship or personal difficulties such as redundancy, bereavement, illness or relationship breakdown.

There for you offers:

- a debt counseling service
- advice and support
- financial assistance and
- wellbeing breaks.

The service is also a gateway to a network of credit unions which can help members to save and borrow money safely.

Call 020 7121 5620 or email [thereforyou@unison.co.uk](mailto:thereforyou@unison.co.uk) or visit [unison.org.uk/thereforyou](http://unison.org.uk/thereforyou)

### UNISON learning

UNISON provides a range of education courses for members and activists. In addition to a wide range of training to develop confidence and skills as a UNISON activist, UNISON also runs member learning courses including

Return to Learn and taster workshops on issues like developing your skills and facing change.

For more information email [learningandorganising@unison.co.uk](mailto:learningandorganising@unison.co.uk)

### **Legal support**

UNISON's legal support includes free help with most work problems that members may have. This can either be from our specialist in-house lawyers or through the team of trade union solicitors that are on hand to help, or by local union reps, branches and officers. But our help doesn't just stop when you leave work. We offer free initial legal advice to members on any matter not related to work, plus a range of other legal help for members and their families.

Exclusions and qualifying periods apply, so always check what members are entitled to.

### **Member services**

UNISON offers a wide range of services to its members including:

- low interest mortgages
- competitive insurance
- discount shopping
- reduced price holidays
- Croyde Bay Holiday Centre
- lower rate credit cards
- rulebook benefits (e.g. accident and incapacity benefit).

Don't worry, you're not expected to know about all these services in detail. The important thing is that you have some leaflets and can get further information from your branch or UNISONdirect.

More detail is given in the leaflet *UNISON Plus: Great Deals for UNISON members*. UNISONdirect can also answer questions on the full range of member benefits.

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## **15 Getting involved in UNISON**

### **The branch**

Sometimes a branch is made up of members working for one employer e.g. a particular hospital trust or university. More commonly, a branch covers members working for a number of employers based in a geographical area and providing similar types of services. Branches fall into one of the following service groups: local government, health care, higher education, community, police and justice, energy and water, environment and transport.

### **Branch structure**

All branches must have at least one members' meeting a year. This is known as the annual general meeting which is held between 1 January and 31 March each year.

The branch officers and some or all stewards form the branch committee.

Branch committees meet monthly and are responsible for running all branch business between full members' meetings. In larger branches there may be stewards structures organised by separate employers or departments.

More information UNISON's *Code of Good Branch Practice*.

## **Self-organised groups**

Everyone shares responsibility for equality in UNISON. But our equality work includes groups for members who experience particular types of prejudice and discrimination – our self organised groups.

UNISON has four self-organised groups:

- women
- black members
- disabled members
- lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) members.
- There are also special organising structures for:
  - young members (age 28 and under)
  - retired members.

To find out more, talk to your branch equalities officer or contact UNISONdirect

## **Making policy**

UNISON's policy and general objectives are decided at the union's national delegate conference. This takes place in June each year. All branches are entitled to send delegates to the conference in proportion to the size of their membership. The conference makes policy on a wide range of issues.

In addition, each of the main service groups and self-organised groups hold conferences to develop policy within the national framework.

Branches can submit their own motions and amendments to conference, and branch delegates can speak in debates and vote.

Implementation of policy between conferences is the responsibility of the highest elected body, the national executive council or NEC. All NEC members are UNISON members who are elected by individual member ballot once every two years.

In addition, similar bodies exist for service groups and self-organised groups.

Each region has a regional council made up of representatives from each branch depending on its size. Regions also have regional committees which oversee the implementation of policy and co-ordination of branch activity within regions.

## **UNISON staff**

UNISON employs staff at national, regional and branch level to support elected representatives.

The majority of staff are employed at regional level, with teams of organisers trained to support branches in recruitment and organising, negotiation and representation.

Some branches also employ staff, normally to undertake administrative duties.

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## 16 Useful resources

Our online catalogue can be found at  
[unison.org.uk/for-activists/help-and-advice/communicating/online-catalogue/](http://unison.org.uk/for-activists/help-and-advice/communicating/online-catalogue/)

You can download items as a PDF or order print copies using the stock numbers below.

*UNISON Health and Safety Reps Handbook*, stock number 1684

*Trained and Active Plan*, stock number 2919

*Organising Steward Course Workbook* (available on the course only)

*UNISON Code of Good Branch Practice*, stock number 0171

*Effective Campaigning*, a UNISON guide, stock number 2916

*UNISON Representation Guide*, stock number 2426

*Time to Act*, stock number 2359

*UNISONplus – Great deals for UNISON members*, stock number 0711

*UNISON Rule Book 2014*, stock number 0834







